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ABSTRACT

During the past 10 years, there has been a movement among state education departments to develop academic content standards, standards-based assessments of student achievement, and standards-related high school graduation requirements for students. This Digest discusses: (1) state content standards in history; (2) standards-based student assessment and graduation requirements; and (3) recommendations for improving history education through national and state content standards, assessments of student achievement in history, and graduation requirements. Lists 12 references. (BT)

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History Standards in the Fifty States

By Sarah Drake Brown

During the past ten years, there has been a movement among state education departments to develop academic content standards, standards-based assessments of student achievement, and standards-related high school graduation requirements for students. This Digest discusses (1) state content standards in history for students, (2) standards-based student assessment and graduation requirements, and (3) recommendations for improving history education through content standards, assessments of student achievement in history, and graduation requirements.

Student Content Standards in History. The National History Standards emerged in the 1990s as part of the federal government's Goals 2000 agenda (The Center for History in the Schools 1996). Most of the states subsequently developed state content standards for their students. Each of the states (except Iowa and Rhode Island) have developed content standards pertaining to history, the social sciences, or social studies. A recent survey investigated whether or not states had created standards specific to the discipline of history and the extent to which these standards required students to engage in historical thinking (Brown and Patrick 2003, 5-6). Key findings of this survey are:

- Thirty-one states have standards that recognize history as a discipline and make at least a minimal attempt to teach students how to think historically; the quality of these standards varies widely.
- Fourteen states (among the 31 states mentioned in the preceding item) have developed standards that emphasize periodization and include substantial and specific treatments of key content in U.S. history and world history.
- Twelve states have standards that are somewhat grounded in history; these states emphasize content or historical thinking, but not both; the standards of these states tend to be broad and superficial in their treatment of content.
- Five states have written standards not grounded in history; these states' standards follow a general social studies model and do not emphasize content in history or historical thinking.

The Thomas B. Fordham Foundation (Saxe 1998; Stern 2003) and the Albert Shanker Institute (Gagnon 2003) have sponsored studies evaluating treatments of history in the state standards for student achievement. According to the Fordham Foundation study, the standards in two-thirds of the states are greatly deficient in their treatment of history. They tend to lack clarity, coherence, specificity, and depth. The study of state standards conducted by the Shanker Institute (founded and managed by the American Federation of Teachers) finds great deficiencies in treatments of U.S. history and world history. According to this investigation, less than one third of the states have satisfactory history standards. This judgment is based on a set of criteria that emphasizes the clarity, coherence, connectedness, and depth of core content of standards in U.S. history and world history. For example, highly rated state standards (1) clearly specify essential content, (2) systematically provide a scope and sequence of content, and (3) coherently present essential facts and ideas across various courses of study in the curriculum. (Gagnon 2003, 22-29).

The Shanker Institute report claims that the state standards based on the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) model "are the weakest on specifics and tend not to offer a common core of learning. Contrary to the social studies announced aim—competent citizenship—they have very little political history and are weak ... on the political, economic, social, and cultural ideas of all world civilizations, including Western" (Gagnon 2003, 23). The report also criticizes the NCSS standards for social studies (Schneider 1994) for their "sweeping topics" and "vague, imprecise understandings" that are "contrary to preparing citizens of sound judgment" (Gagnon 2003, 24).

Standards-Based Assessments and High School Graduation Requirements. To what extent are state content standards in history linked to assessments of student achievement and high school graduation requirements? A recent survey provides information about this question (Brown and Patrick 2003, 6-7). Key findings of this survey are:

- Thirty states require students to satisfactorily complete a course in United States history to graduate from high school.
- Twelve states require graduating students to have satisfactorily completed a course in world history.
- Ten states require students to take credits or units in social studies; specifications regarding history courses under these social studies credits are unclear.
- Sixteen states administer criterion-referenced or standards-based assessment for their students in history, the social sciences, or social studies.
- Twelve states are in the process of developing standards-based assessment for their students; three of these states have suspended the administration of these assessments.
- Twenty-two states have no standards-based assessment in history, the social sciences, or social studies.

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Recommendations. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in U.S. history has revealed great deficiencies in student knowledge (Lapp and Others 2002). A primary means to significant gains in student achievement in history is greater and better treatment of this subject in the core curriculum of schools (Fonte 1994; Gagnon 2003; Stern 2003). Students should be required to study some facet of U.S. history or world history in every level of their schooling, from elementary school through high school (Bradley Commission on History in the Schools 1988).

A second recommendation for improving the teaching and learning of history is to develop high-quality standards in every state as clear, cogent, teachable, and assessable guides to the teaching and learning of core content (Gagnon 2003; Saxe 1998; Stern 1998).

Third, all state departments of education in the United States should require students to successfully complete high school courses in U.S. history and world history as a condition of graduation from high school.

Fourth, all state departments of education should require a satisfactory level of student achievement on standards-based assessments in history.

Fifth, content and thinking skills in history, pertinent to education for democratic citizenship, should be emphasized in the preparation and professional development of teachers and the instruction of students (Gagnon 2003; Wineburg 2001).

References and ERIC Resources. The following list of resources includes references used to prepare this Digest. The items followed by an ED number are available in microfiche, paper, or electronic full text from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). For information about prices, contact EDRS, 7420 Fullerton Road, Suite 110, Springfield, Virginia 22153-2852; World Wide Web <edrs.com>; telephone numbers are (703) 440-1400 and (800) 443-3742. Entries followed by an EJ number, annotated monthly in CURRENT INDEX TO JOURNALS IN EDUCATION (CIJE), are not available through EDRS. However, they can be located in the journal section of most larger libraries by using the bibliographic information provided, requested through Interlibrary Loan, or ordered from commercial reprint services.

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